

1. Chapter 23 in the Palgrave Handbook of the European Administrative System bears the title “The Expert–Executive Nexus in the European Administrative System: Expert Groups and the European Commission” and is written by Åse Gornitzka and Ulf Sverdrup, based on their 2008 article “Access of Experts: Information and EU decision-making”, published in *West European Politics* four years prior to the publication of the Palgrave Handbook.

The authors are both Norwegians holding doctorate degrees from the University of Oslo. At the time of publication, Åse Gornitzka served as professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science and at ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo¹; Sverdrup had similarly been professor at the university but directed the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) since 2011². Gornitzkas theoretical background is in organisation theory and institutional theory, and her focus lies more specifically on research and knowledge policy in relation to both the EU, academia, and expertise, as well as their interplay with (EU-) public policy making³. Sverdrup’s research and publications as a newspaper columnist, meanwhile, have focused on international (geo-)politics, EU politics, and Norwegian foreign affairs, including Norway’s relation to the EU⁴.

2. The chapter concerns the so-called “nexus” between experts and executive in the shape of expert groups within the European Commission (p. 401). The chapter presupposes that the expert groups – “a consultative entity comprising external experts advising the commission in the preparation of legislative proposals and policy initiatives, as well as in its task of monitoring, coordinating, and cooperating with member states” (p. 403) – aren’t simply a “problem-solving instrument”, but important to both cultivate relations and solve conflicts between different levels of administrations and different institutions, as well as to legitimise EU policy (p. 415). The chapter is concerned with giving an overview of expert groups in the commission on the basis of empirical data (p. 401). The authors differentiate, drawing on organisational theory concerning bureaucracies, between three kinds of expertise: science-oriented expertise, society-oriented expertise, and government-oriented expertise (pp. 405-406). These three types of expertise must, however, according to the authors, be seen as ideal types, and they present several variables that can lead to a variation in the use of expert groups by the commission (p. 407). To every variable is tied an exemplary hypothesis to be

¹ “Åse Gornitzka”, Universitetet i Oslo, accessed 5th of April 2023 at <https://www.uio.no/personer/ledelsen/aasego/index.html>

² “Ulf Sverdrup”, Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institut, accessed 5th of April 2023 at <https://www.nupi.no/en/about-nupi/employees/researchers/ulf-sverdrup>.

³ Bauer, W. Trondal J., *The Palgrave Handbook of the European administrative system* NY, Palgrave, 2015, p. xv.

⁴ “Ulf Sverdrup”, NUPI.

examined in the following part of the text (pp. 407ff). The variables and hypothesis can be presented as follows:

- 1) The legal framework – DGs with supranational competencies might not be as reliant on the expertise of national administrations;
- 2) In-house expertise and administrative capacity – DGs with a high amount of these might not be as reliant on expert groups;
- 3) Institutionalisation and routinization – DGs where strongly institutionalised and routinised processes might not be as reliant on expert groups;
- 4) Contestation of policy area – DGs that concern higher-contested issues might need to include more experts in the form of societal groups.

Based primarily on data from 2007 and 2009, the authors present the number of expert groups per DG in a table and the percentages of different types of expertise in a pie chart (p. 410, p. 412). They discuss the patterns revealed both by the number of expert groups per DG and the types of expertise associated with the different groups and, concerning the four hypotheses, that 1) the data points towards a curvilinear relation – the stronger a DGs competency, the higher the likelihood to include a high number of national actors, but only to a certain point; 2) can be proven, but only in relation to national experts and 4) can indeed be proven (pp. 408ff). The influence of routines, habits and path dependency on different DGs utilisation of expert groups is, according to the authors, also relevant (p. 415).

3. The chapter is a condensed version of a longer article – comparing it to the chapter reveals that the original article contains some additional information on the construction of the data sourced for the investigation that, it can be assumed, didn't fit the shorter format of the book chapter. For the chapter, the author refer to both recent qualitative studies on the nature of the expert group system and large-N quantitative studies based on data constructed on the base of the Commission's register on expert groups, containing the "number of groups and the key properties of these groups, such as the lead services in the Commission, policy area, tasks and the composition of the group". (pp. 403-4). The authors concede that the data is limited in that it doesn't shine a light inside the "black boxes" of the expert groups beyond their composition, nor the way they influence actual policy, and acknowledge that these topics lie beyond the scope of the text (p. 411).

The quantitative method constitutes the backbone of the text, and the authors use their data, firstly, purely to reveal the patterns of the number of expert groups per DG (Table 23.1) and the composition of the groups (Figure 23.1, Table 23.2). Moreover, they use multivariate

analysis (p. 413). Both the investigation into patterns as well as the analysis are used to investigate the hypotheses put forward earlier in the text, and results of qualitative studies are included along with research to construct the authors' arguments as well as to explain the connections found (e.g. p. 410).

4. Notable elements of the chapter can be identified, first, as the heterogeneity of which DGs have the most expert groups – neither which group a DG belongs to nor the nature of its tasks seems to have anything to do with its likelihood to have more or less expert groups associated with it (p. 409). Numbers for 2007 and 2009 show some DGs reduced the number of expert groups in that timespan (p. 409). In 2007, the DGs with most expert groups were Environment, Research and Enterprise and Industry; in 2009, the latter was equally represented among the top three, along with Taxation and Customs Union and Eurostat (Table 23.1). Regarding the numbers of participation by different kind of experts shows that the third type of expertise identified by the authors, that is, experts from national administrations, is clearly the most strongly represented: these national experts participate in four out of five expert groups, and looking at all possible constellations of the three types of expertise in the groups, groups with *only* experts from national administrators participating are more common than mixed or purely science- or society groups, respectively (pp. 411-412). One third of groups have scientists participating, 40 percent societal actors (Figure 23.1). Table 23.2 further differentiates between types of participants in expert groups than the three ideal types, which also reveals that a fifth of all groups contains participants from business and enterprises. Moreover, this shows that not only are national administrations strongly represented, but competent national authorities are also represented in one third of all groups. The table equally differentiates between two different types of scientific experts, academics and scientists, which are represented in 17,3% and 12,5% of groups, respectively. This illustrates how the three different types of expert systems really have to be understood as ideal types, not only theoretically, but also in terms of their composition. The types of experts least represented in the expert groups are regional administrations (5,5%), agriculture (4,2%), international organisations (4%), local administrations (3,2%) and European Parliament MPs (0,2%).

National administrations being by far the largest source of experts “exported” towards the Commission expert groups is, further, one of the most central elements of the text. The fact that national agencies are equally well-represented, the authors argue, illustrates how expert groups are part of a deeply interconnected policy network between the Commission and

national levels of government, and how they are a central path into the EU policy processes for outside actors (p. 412, p. 415).

5. The chapter can be criticised from different angles. Firstly, it can be said that the theoretical framework of three different types of experts constrains the results the authors are likely to find at the fact that theoretical backing for this stems from theory concerning national administrations disregards the EU's role as the uniquely multilevel system the authors acknowledge it to be. Furthermore, the authors differentiate between two fundamental explanations for the distribution of expert groups: firstly, active decision-making and manoeuvring by the Commission based in the three “models” of expertise, echoing organisational theory, and secondly, rules and habits that, it is implied, can explain a great deal of other variation (represented in hypothesis nr. 3, see above). The first argument anthropomorphises the Commission as an actor with a clear will, while the second is implied to affect patterns of participation. While an exploration of this could be understood as lying outside the scope of the article, it is unclear how large the authors estimate this element to be, and, crucially, where these “rules, habits and path dependency” originate and how exactly they affect different DGs' relation to expert groups and their participants as a structuring force (p. 415).

Were one to take an approach that regards the European administrative system as a bureaucratic field with internal competition, moreover, and thus included the category of “experts” as another category of the diverse individual and collective actors within that field, rather than a passive resource for the Commission to draw upon, different explanations for the distribution of expert types in the different DGs could be presumed to come to light⁵. As a short example, different types of experts could be considered, rather, as individual and collective actors (in the case of national experts acting at the crossroads of the European and their national bureaucratic field) who are able to, over time, accrue expert capital within certain DGs and policy areas and will thus be more likely to be included. This could also explain the variation ascribed by the authors to “habits, rules and path dependency”, and their approach that mainly sees the Commission as a uniform actor which steers the system of expert groups' town-down could thus be criticised for disregarding the agency experts and DG leadership hold – individually and collectively – in shaping, actively and by the accidental force of accrued micro-decisions, the expert-executive nexus.

⁵ D. Georgakakis, dir, « Les transformation du champ administratif européen (2015-2022) ». *Revue française d'administration publique*, 180, 2021/4